

VZCZCXYZ0014
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDM #0776 2111507
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 301507Z JUL 07
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3950

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000776

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

FOR NEA/ELA AND A/OPR/OS CAMERON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/31/2018
TAGS: [AMGT](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: SARG SAYS "DCS MUST BEGIN LICENSE PROCESS" TO
RESOLVE STAFF VISA STANDOFF

REF: DAMASCUS 590

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin for
reasons 1.4b/d

1. (C) Summary: MFA delivered July 30 the official answer to Embassy's three-month effort to get visas for teachers/staff at the Embassy-managed Damascus Community School (DCS). MFA stated Embassy had to "begin the registration process" for DCS as a private school in Syria with the Ministry of Education. Once accommodation was reached (which MFA vowed to facilitate and expedite), DCS's problems would be solved "forever." MFA moved quickly to set up meeting for CDA with Deputy Minister of Education for July 31 to discuss issue. This meeting should show whether this is a face-saving solution to allow the school to reopen, or whether we face insurmountable interference in curriculum and other operational issues that will force closure of the school. End summary.

2. (C) CDA was convoked July 30 by FM Muallim's office director Bassam Sabbagh to receive a response to our repeated requests to the MFA to issue residency permits to allow 23 teachers and staff at the U.S. Embassy managed DCS to rejoin or come on board as new staff-members. In recent weeks, Ambassadors of many countries here (including the Dean, on behalf of the entire corps) have weighed in with various levels of the SARG including FM Muallim and above. Separately, prominent businessmen (some of whom have their children in the school and others who support the idea of an independent American-curriculum school in Damascus) have weighed in all the way to the Presidential palace, where we understand President Bashar has taken a personal interest in this matter. The MFA had told Ambassadors that the issue will be resolved.

3. (C) Sabbagh said the official SARG position was that DCS was not licensed by the Syrian Authorities. He said that the MFA could not issue work permits for the staff until this issue was solved. The MFA would work to find a solution to this problem he said, but the Embassy needed to begin the registration process by "applying for a license." Sabbagh emphasized that the MFA "wanted to find a solution." He said that this was not "about politics" and said the MFA would work to expedite the process with the goal of allowing the visa issue to be resolved as soon as possible and DCS to open on time. He said this would solve DCS problems "forever." CDA noted that many diplomatic schools around the world operated under foreign ministries and that a diplomatic school was normally independent to provide for the different needs of the international community attending the school. CDA noted that requirements on curriculum and schedules, for example, were very different for students seeking to enter U.S. universities or colleges. Equally, vacations needed to be based on the needs of expatriates who travelled home for vacations. Sabbagh said he would arrange a meeting with

those involved as soon as possible to determine the requirements. CDA made clear that this did not mean Embassy could agree to the conditions. Sabbagh said the MFA would "work with us" on this issue. Immediately following the meeting, MFA advised a meeting had been arranged for the CDA with the Deputy Minister of Education for 12:00 noon on July 31.

(C) Comment: The MFA response may either be a face-saving strategy to get the Embassy to appear to be making a concession on its status or it may signal a hard-line position that DCS must be placed firmly under the thumb of the Education Ministry. We will see what the Ministry of Education proposes and will discuss the matter with the DCS Board on August 1. We note the French Embassy has been in negotiations with the SARG on its status for the past several years. If the Ministry of Education presents unacceptable demands, we propose pressing the MFA to find a solution. We will advise the Department on what we learn from the Ministry of Education.

CORBIN